

The Start of Something by TheVioletHour (TinternAbbey)

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Summary:

Eddie defies his mother, climbs a tree, and makes a friend.

The Start of Something

Promise you'll never climb any trees, Eddie. You'll fall and break a bone!

Don't pick up that branch, Eddie. You'll get splinters!

Eddie, be careful playing around those leaves. They make your allergies act up!

All his mother's warnings flashed through Eddie's mind in quick succession as he stood at the corner of Jackson Street, staring into the wide, inviting branches of a front yard tree. He was eight years old and *finally* allowed to ride a bike, though he had to keep the training wheels on like a baby. His bike stood upright on the sidewalk, straight and alert like a watchdog. Eddie liked the idea of his bike standing guard. If his mother could see him and even *suspected* what he was contemplating, she would keep him locked indoors for the rest of the summer.

For his own good, of course. Everything his mother did—no matter how strict or unpleasant—was for Eddie's own good, but as far as Eddie knew, trees had never hurt anybody. And he desperately wanted to climb this one.

Eddie had been five the first time he tried to climb a tree. It wasn't even a very *big* tree. More like an oversized bush that grew in his backyard, but the way his mother reacted, it could have been the size of a skyscraper. She came bursting out of the house in her bathrobe, *right* when Eddie hooked his arms around the lowest branch, shrieking, "No, Eddie, no! You'll break your neck! Get away from there!"

She pulled him from the tree and smothered him in a tight, choking embrace, which always seemed to smell like medicine.

"Don't you ever do that again, Eddie," she told him. "Don't you ever do that again, don't you *ever*."

He had to stay inside for the rest of the day. The following morning, he discovered the tree was gone. A stump had taken its place, looking

strange and lonely in the middle of the lawn. Eddie wasn't supposed to sit on that stump (which was completely rooted out of the ground a week later) or else he would get splinters for sure.

Eddie wasn't supposed to do a lot of things. It was hard to remember all his mother's rules, so he learned to be careful of everything. If he *wasn't* careful, his mother got upset and shouted a lot, which made *Eddie* feel upset so that the world turned dizzy and he couldn't breathe. Sometimes when this happened, he felt like he was drowning and started to cry, gasping on his tears until he broke the surface of his fear and found air again.

He knew now, at the mature age of eight, that this was Asthma. He also knew that plenty of kids at school had climbed plenty of trees and never broke their necks. Surely it couldn't hurt to climb just *one*. He would go up quickly, just to see what it was all about, then go back down again.

Eddie took two steps forward until his shoes crunched against the freshly cut grass. (*Remember your allergies*, his mother chided him.) It occurred to him that he was probably trespassing, and that the people who owned the lawn wouldn't want some strange kid in their tree, but he was sure nobody was watching him. His bike continued to stand watch on its training wheels, which suddenly didn't seem so babyish anymore. It felt strangely comforting.

He took two more steps. When he reached out a trembling hand, his skin brushed against the rough bark of the tree trunk. *Look, ma, no splinters!* Growing bolder, he scoped out the best possible climbing spot and hoisted himself up, *up* into the seat of the tree.

There!

He had done it.

Eddie sat nestled in a ring of branches, heart pounding with his efforts. He had a clear view of the street from here. His hands had gotten a little dirty, but that was soon remedied when he wiped them on his shorts, and he hadn't sneezed *once* from all the grass and leaves. Eddie could almost pretend that he had climbed into a secret world aboveground, where no one could find him. Where no one

called him *faggy* and *sissy-boy* because he couldn't play tag or kickball with the other kids

He was *safe* here. He was alone. He was—

—*going to break your neck, Eddie!* his mother cried in his head. *What have I TOLD you about climbing trees? You get away from there before you hurt yourself!*

Eddie glanced down at the lawn below. The grass suddenly seemed a million miles away. The whole world turned dizzy and he clutched the nearest branch, fighting for breath.

You have delicate lungs, Eddie, his mother reminded him frantically. *You HAVE to be careful!*

She was right, like she always was. Now Eddie was stuck up here, at least *fifty* feet from the ground, while his throat was growing smaller by the second. He was going to die right here, out on some stranger's lawn. First his lungs would give out and he'd lose consciousness, and *then* he'd tumble out of the tree and break every bone in his body. He had been stupid to defy his mother. *Stupid stupid stupid.* She had warned him about the trees!

Somehow, in the midst of his panic, Eddie managed to free his inhaler from his shorts pocket. His right hand grappled for it on instinct, while his left still clutched the tree branch. The medicine shot down his throat with a blast, which must have been noisy because moments later somebody asked:

"Are you all r-r-right?"

Eddie looked down, but instead of endless miles that ended in grass, he found himself staring at a boy standing at the base of the tree. He recognized the boy, too. Bill Denbrough had been in his first grade class two years ago.

"I can't get down," Eddie blurted out.

Getting into the tree had been easy enough, but getting out seemed next to impossible. He felt like one of those cartoon cats on TV that had to be rescued by the fire department.

Bill edged closer to the tree. He appeared to be concentrating.

"Can you j-j-jump?" Bill asked.

"No way! Are you crazy? I'll break my neck!"

"Then you'll have to cl-climb down. If you go s-s-slowly, it's not so bad."

Bill talked him through it. Or stuttered through it, really, but Bill's words held a certain magic in spite of the stutter. He guided Eddie with all the patience in the world and offered to catch Eddie if he fell—though Bill was built like a twig and would undoubtedly get crushed under his weight—until Eddie felt solid ground.

He was so relieved, he collapsed on the lawn and *basked* in all that firm green grass. (*Who cares about allergies? Who cares who cares who cares—*)

Bill flopped down in the grass beside him. He wore a faded He-Man T-shirt. "Y-you're Eddie, right?"

Eddie took another blast on his inhaler, just to be safe. "Yeah."

"Is that your b-b-bike?"

"Yeah," Eddie said again. This time it came out as a sigh. "My mom makes me keep the training wheels. But I've been riding really good for three months now!"

"Want to r-r-ride around the neighborhood?"

Eddie waited for the inevitable punchline. For *sissy* or *queer* or *baby* to come spilling out along with the joke, but Bill said none of those things. He simply got on his bike, a monstrous contraption that could probably seat two, and waited for Eddie. They shot off down Jackson Street and sped onto Witcham, racing each other whenever the streets were free of passing cars. They raced all the way to Bill's house. Bill won, of course, since he wasn't bogged down by training wheels, but he didn't make Eddie feel bad about it. Bill's mom gave them snacks and let them watch cartoons, as long as they did it *quietly* so they didn't wake Bill's little brother.

Eddie decided right then and there that Bill was going to be his best friend. He had never had a best friend before.

He had never really had any *friends*.

When Eddie got home and told his mother about Bill, he thought she would be happy for him. But instead she pursed up her lips—like she always did when Eddie's doctor pronounced him a *healthy little boy*—and looked ready to start crying or shouting, or both.

"Bill goes to my school," Eddie said quickly, hoping he could wipe that pursed-up expression from her face. "He's going into the third grade too! He says he hopes we're in the same class together."

"Just always remember how much your mother loves you, Eddie." She pulled him into one of her warm, sweaty, medicine-smelling hugs. She trembled against him. "Don't you forget. Don't you *ever*."

*

When school started up a few weeks later, Eddie had a brand-new Smurfs lunchbox and the annual doctor's note that kept him from playing games at recess. Eddie had been bringing these notes to school for as long as he could remember. He always hated the doctor visits that led to them. His mother shouted a *lot* and then Eddie couldn't breathe, and the moment he pulled out his inhaler his mother was suddenly smiling and Dr. Baynes seemed to *deflate* as he scribbled the note.

Eddie's mother usually had to shout to get his doctors to agree with her. She always compared them to ducks, too. Eddie figured ducks must be pretty stupid because every one of his doctors was supposedly a quack.

He was the only kid in his third-grade class with an inhaler and a doctor's note. He and Bill had been put into different classes. This was disappointing, but Bill always found Eddie at recess and kept him so entertained, Eddie could *almost* forget how much fun it would be to play kickball with the other kids.

Bill was always making up stories at recess. Sometimes he and Eddie

would act them out on the farthest corner of the playground, where they wouldn't be disturbed. It was the only time Bill's stutter wasn't so bad. One moment he was plain old Bill, stumbling on his words, but the moment he pretended to be a pirate or a king or a Jedi, he spoke as perfectly as anyone.

For a while it was just the two of them, until one day Bill showed up at recess with a neatly-dressed boy and asked Eddie if Stan could play with them.

Eddie knew Stan a little. They'd been in the same class last year, though Eddie didn't talk to him much. But Stan had never called Eddie a wimp under his breath like some other kids did, so Eddie figured he must be all right.

He didn't know what to think, though, when Richie joined their group.

Richie was the only kid aside from Eddie who had to sit out sometimes during games. He was in Bill's class and had to miss recess pretty often because he was *constantly* getting in trouble. Eddie had always made an effort not to talk to him. He didn't want to get in trouble too.

But now he *had* to talk to Richie, because Bill liked him for some reason and Bill had never steered Eddie wrong before.

The first time Richie came over to play with them, he *stared* at Eddie, like Eddie was some kind of weird Star Wars alien. Which really wasn't fair, because if anyone deserved to be stared at, it was definitely Richie with his messy dark hair and his mud-spattered Gremlins T-shirt. His glasses were too big for his face, which made him look like a mutant bug, and one side had been mended with bright silver duct tape.

As if the staring wasn't bad enough, the first thing Richie said was, "I heard you can't run around the playground or else you'll die. That must be boring as *fuck*."

Richie said the last word extra loud, like he was testing it out.

Eddie flinched. He had only heard *that word* a couple of times and wasn't sure what it meant, but he knew he wasn't supposed to say it.

"Isn't that a bad word?" demanded Eddie.

"Yeah, just like your mom," said Richie. He tugged one of the straps on Eddie's overalls. "Does she make you wear these so your pants don't fall down?"

According to Stan, who had been in *every* class with Richie since kindergarten, Richie's behavior was far from unusual.

"He think he's a comedian," Stan scoffed. "*I* think he's just weird, but you get used to him after a while."

Eddie liked Stan the best after Bill. Stan never liked to get dirty, which was perfectly fine with Eddie, and he could be funny sometimes without even trying. He had a big encyclopedia of birds that he lugged around in his backpack (which was sure to give him *sco-lee-osis*, according to Eddie's mom) and he liked to spend his weekends in Bassey Park with his binoculars, when his dad wasn't too busy to take him bird-watching.

Stan was wrong about Richie, though. There *was* something unusual. The more Eddie played with him, the more he discovered that Richie had a habit of targeting *him* specifically.

Richie started calling him Eds—which Eddie *hated*—and splashed in mud puddles on purpose *right* when Eddie walked by. He collected bugs, usually beetles and caterpillars and ladybugs, then snuck up behind Eddie and slipped them down the back of his shirt. Whenever Eddie did an especially nice chalk drawing out on the blacktop, Richie would steal his chalk and draw a huge dick on it. And that wasn't *half* the things Richie did. He apparently thought it was his purpose in life to torment Eddie as much as possible.

"Why does he pick on *me*?" Eddie complained to Bill once. "It's like he hates me! Did I do something to him?"

"Richie d-d-doesn't hate you," said Bill.

"He sure acts like he does!"

"He doesn't," Bill said confidently.

In the end, Eddie decided that Richie was the most confusing person on earth. At lunchtime, Richie thought it would be funny to shoot milk through his straw, using Eddie's *face* as a target. It was chocolate milk too, which tasted like liquid cardboard. *He does too hate me*, Eddie thought as he furiously wiped his face, while Richie was howling with laughter. *Bill was just trying to make me feel better!*

But later that day, at afternoon recess, a bunch of kids were organizing a game of tag. Stan agreed to play, but Eddie declined as usual, and some fourth-grader called Eddie a wuss.

Like a bolt of lightning, Richie came out of nowhere and *tackled* the fourth-grade boy, yelling, "You take that back! Take it back!"

Richie had to stay after school for three days, but he insisted it was worth it.

"Nobody gets to call you names but me, right, Eds?" he said.

Eddie still hated being called Eds.

(But sometimes he kind of liked it too.)

*

Two months into the school year, Eddie was finally allowed to take the training wheels off his bike. Bill came over and helped him do it. Then the two of them raced down the street, but Eddie didn't stand a chance because his mother sat on the front steps watching him like a hawk.

She never warmed up to Bill. Eddie guessed it was the stutter, like maybe Sonia thought stutters were contagious and Eddie might catch it if he played too much with Bill. She never said this *out loud*, but Eddie caught her sighing sometimes after Bill left the house. She always shut all the window blinds afterwards, too. Shut them with a hard *snap!* as if she was afraid Bill would come back to peek at them.

Eddie hoped she would like Stan better, since Stan was always very clean and never rowdy, but even *Stan* couldn't make a good

impression on his mother. This time Eddie figured it was Stan's Jewishness that bothered her. She called him "that little kike boy" whenever Stan left the house and made Eddie wash his hands, even though Stan was the cleanest kid Eddie had ever met.

He knew he would be an idiot to invite Richie over.

Not that he didn't *want* Richie to come over. He did. But every time he thought about it, a thousand disastrous scenarios played out in his head. Richie was a lot like an untrained puppy. He was bound to track dirt into the house, break something, and make way too much noise. (And maybe even pee on the rug while he was it. Anything was possible.)

Eddie lived in fear of Richie and his mother ever crossing paths with each other. All it would take was one inappropriate comment from Richie, like, *Nice to meet you, Mrs. K. How the fuck are ya?* and Eddie would never be allowed out of the house again.

Richie wasn't stupid. He *knew* Bill and Stan had both been to Eddie's house multiple times. One day he got really moody when Stan mentioned the board game he played with Eddie over the weekend. At recess, Richie put a couple of beetles down Stan's shirt for a change, though he didn't laugh when Stan ran around in circles, yelling in outrage.

At lunch Eddie sat right next to Richie. "I have a new game," he said.

Richie was building a fort with his french fries. "So?"

"It's called the Quiet Game. If you come over to my house this Saturday, you can play it."

Richie's eyes went all wide behind his glasses. He looked more like a mutant bug than ever. "How do you play?"

"It's the hardest game in the world. You have to be really quiet and really good and can only talk when I say so. If you say a bad word or talk too loud, you lose the game. If my mom doesn't kick you out of the house, you win. Want to play?"

"Sounds like a real drag," said Richie, setting another french fry on

top of his fort.

"You'd never win, anyway," said Stan. He was cutting up his hamburger into neat little bites with his plastic knife and fork.

"Yeah, I could," said Richie.

"Then you can come to my house on Saturday," said Eddie. "But you *have* to play the game and can't stop until I say so."

Richie agreed. His moodiness quickly vanished and he was back to joking around as usual. Eddie wondered how on earth he was going to tell his mother that he had *three* friends instead of two. Lately she had been talking about homeschooling him next year. She had never mentioned it until Eddie started bringing friends around. He knew he was wrong to think so, but he couldn't help suspecting that his mother was happier before Bill wandered into his life.

He was still worrying about his mother by the end of the day. While he waited for her to pick him up from school, he kept picturing her crying, telling him, *Eddie, darling, this is horrible! Don't you know that having TOO many friends can make you sick? We have to get you to the ER right away!*

"Hey, Eds."

Richie was waiting for his mom too. He was bobbing a bright red yo-yo up and down.

(Yo-yos were not allowed in school.)

The yo-yo swung close to Eddie's backpack, then retreated. Richie stared down at it, making the red plastic twitch a little. "You don't have to invite me to your house. I know you don't really want to."

"I *do*," said Eddie. "It's just—it's my mom."

Richie looked up from the yo-yo and grinned. "Is she as cute as you?"

"What? No! I'm scared that if you meet my mom, she won't like you and won't let me play with you anymore!"

Eddie didn't mean to blurt that out, but there it was. He clapped a hand over his mouth and wondered if this was a good time to pull out his inhaler.

Richie's yo-yo went perfectly still. "Oh, yeah? Well your mom can suck my dick."

"Eew, *what?* What does *that* mean?"

But Eddie's mom pulled up and Richie didn't answer. He was too busy staring through his big glasses at Sonia's car, a little smirk tugging at his lips.

"If I poked your mom with a safety pin, do you think she'd pop?" Richie asked.

"No," said Eddie.

"I think she would! She'd go *BOOM* and explode everywhere!"

Eddie gave Richie a shove, but he was laughing as he climbed into his mother's car.

*

In the end, he didn't have to worry about Richie coming over, because the following morning he woke up sniffling. His mother declared he was "too sick for school" and made him stay home.

He didn't *feel* very sick. Sure, his nose ran a little and his throat tickled, but it didn't seem like a big deal. Yet his mother made him lie in bed *all* day. And she didn't go to work to make sure he stayed there. It had to do with Eddie being delicate. All he had to do was cough or sneeze or step outside without a jacket and his mother acted like he was made of glass. Like Eddie would suddenly *break*, just like the porcelain teacup he shattered at his grandma's house when he was seven.

His mother made him stay home the next day too. "Just to be on the safe side," she said, after taking Eddie's temperature.

It seemed like Eddie was always stuck on the safe side. There he was,

propped up in bed, imprisoned in a fortress of pillows and blankets. His taste buds burned from endless helpings of chicken broth and orange juice. His mother kept fussing over him and asking him how he felt, but she never seemed to hear him when he said he felt *better*.

But this was simply what mothers did. They were supposed to worry and fuss over you. And besides, Eddie needed more care than most children did. He was *delicate*. His mother always said so, and why would she ever lie to him?

It had felt so good, though, to climb that tree over the summer. Even though he got stuck and couldn't come down on his own, the initial climb had been the start of something significant. It had been the start of *Bill*. The start of friendship.

Eddie had never really minded staying home from school before, but now that he had actual *friends*, it was agony. Bill would be making up stories at recess without Eddie to help him pick names for the characters. Stan wouldn't have anyone willing to sit still long enough to watch birds with him. And who would Richie tease in Eddie's absence?

(Strangely enough, the thought of Richie picking on someone else did not make Eddie happy.)

On Friday afternoon—the second day of Eddie's house arrest—the phone rang. Eddie, sitting up in bed, strained his ears to listen as his mother picked it up. First she let out this big apologetic *sigh*. The kind of sigh she used when she told Eddie, *I'm sorry, sweetie, but you just CAN'T play outside today. That rain will give you a chill!* Then she sounded weepy, like she might burst into tears any moment. Eddie couldn't catch very much, but he swore he heard Sonia—her voice choked up with potential sobs—say, *He's still too sick* before slamming down the receiver.

"I'm not sneezing anymore," Eddie pointed out several minutes later, when she came in to check on him.

"You can return to school on Monday, if you don't take a turn for the worse," said his mother, after feeling Eddie's forehead. She did not sound optimistic.

"Who called?" Eddie asked. "Was it Bill?"

But his mother didn't answer and told him to rest. Delicate little boys like Eddie needed *lots* of rest to overcome illness.

What illness? Eddie wanted to ask, but he kept quiet. His mother knew best.

Didn't she?

*

On Saturday the doorbell rang.

Eddie was finally allowed to sit on the couch—swaddled in a hundred blankets, of course—to watch TV. This was a big step in the right direction. His mother had been afraid he would strain his eyes, but he *must* be getting better if he could spend all morning in the company of He-Man, the Smurfs, and Alvin and the Chipmunks. The opening theme to Inspector Gadget was just starting up when the doorbell jolted Eddie out of his blanket nest.

Go, Gadget—DING-DONG!

Eddie had a perfect view of the front door. So when his mother sighed and went to answer it, Eddie immediately caught a glimpse of familiar bug-eyed glasses before Sonia blocked the doorway.

"Hello, young lady!" Richie told Sonia in his *horrible* attempt at a grown-up voice. "Is your mother home?"

"I think you have the wrong house," Sonia stiffly replied.

"Eddie Kaspbrak lives here, right? I can see where he gets his good looks from!"

Eddie realized he *had* to intervene. As much as he loved seeing one of his friends, his biggest fear was becoming reality right before his eyes.

He launched himself off the couch and hurried to the door. "Richie! What are *you* doing here?"

Next thing he knew, he was getting squeezed within an inch of his life and Richie's glasses were digging into the side of his face.

"Eds, you're alive! You're alive!" Richie shouted over Sonia's cries of concern. "Bill tried to call you yesterday, but you didn't come to the phone!"

Eddie had never been hugged so hard in his life. Laughing, he tried to wriggle out of Richie's grasp. "Of course I'm alive, you weirdo!"

"That's *enough* rough-housing," said Sonia, looming over them like a cat confronting a pair of cornered mice. "Do you want Eddie to be bedridden for a week?"

"Shit—I mean, shoot! Of course not!" Richie finally released Eddie from his boa constrictor hold. "Sorry, Mrs. K! I just *really* had to come over because there's this bet going on at school. Half the kids in our grade *swear* Eddie's dying!"

Sonia seemed to unthaw at this news. "Eddie has to be very careful," she told Richie. "He always has."

And she proceeded to list off all of Eddie's worst illnesses, starting with the time he got bronchitis when he was five and came *this close* to slipping away from her forever. Richie listened with an unusual amount of patience, his eyes growing more startled by the minute.

"...and that's why you *must* keep the excitement to a minimum in this house," Sonia finished. "Isn't that right, Eddie-Bear? We *don't* want you to have a relapse."

"I know, mommy," Eddie mumbled, eyes glued to the floor.

He guessed his mother didn't want to look like she was *imprisoning* him, though. To his surprise, he was allowed to take Richie to his room, as long as he kept the door open and promised not to play too hard. Eddie always had to leave his door open when Bill and Stan came over, too. It was a stupid rule, but for once he didn't mind because it meant Richie *had* to be quiet for once in his life.

Sure enough, Richie didn't breathe a word when he stepped into Eddie's room. He *stared* instead. It reminded Eddie of the day they

first met on the playground. He always assumed that Richie was just being rude, or he thought Eddie was strange in some way. But maybe he was wrong.

Maybe Richie stared because he thought Eddie was important.

But why? Eddie asked himself. He was nothing special.

Richie glanced at the doorway, as if expecting Sonia to be lurking just outside, then turned to Eddie. He kept his voice soft, but still managed to sound obnoxious when he said, "Your mom calls you *Eddie-Bear*?"

"It's not funny," said Eddie. "And you better not bring it up at school."

"All right, fine, Eddie-Bear. I won't. What's your favorite thing to play with?"

Eddie opened his closet and dragged out a large shoebox. It rattled when he brought it to the rug in the middle of his room.

"I'll race you," he announced, lifting the lid.

The shoebox held his prized collection of Hot Wheels and Matchbox cars. They were a perfect match for his rug, which was printed with a vivid pattern of streets and houses. When Bill came over, he pretended the rug was a real town and had endless stories for the toy cars that rolled down its polyester streets. Eddie doubted Richie would have the patience for that, though, so he rolled the rug out of the way, exposing bare floor underneath.

"Holy shit," Richie said as he dug through the car collection. "Not bad, Eds."

Eddie picked out his favorite, a red Corvette. "My daddy gave them to me before he got sick. He got me the rug, too. I'd love to be a racecar driver when I grow up, but mommy says I'll break my neck. You can break your neck doing a *lot* of things."

"Bullshit. I've never seen a racecar driver break his neck."

"Why do you say so many bad words?" Eddie whispered. "If you get

caught, you can't play with me anymore."

"Bad words are lots of *fun*. Haven't you ever said fuck before?"

"No, and I don't want to. I don't even know what it means."

"It can mean *anything*. That's why it's so fucking rad."

"Stop, Richie!"

Oh, no.

Eddie clapped a hand to his mouth. He hadn't meant to raise his voice. He took a few cars from the shoebox and lined them up, trying to look normal while the heavy tread of Sonia's footsteps approached. She poked her head through the open doorway.

"Eddie? Is everything all right?"

"Yes, mommy," said Eddie, nudging his Corvette so that it rolled a couple inches. "We're playing cars."

She loomed in the doorway for a long moment, eyeing them suspiciously. Like she expected the cars to transform into cigarettes the moment her back was turned.

"You can play for ten more minutes," said Sonia. "And then it's rest time, so you can rebuild your strength."

"I told you so," Eddie whispered to Richie. "She hears *everything*."

Richie selected one of the Hot Wheels: a bright blue racecar with yellow stripes. "Why do you have to leave your door open, anyway? That's a girl rule."

"What do you mean, a girl rule?"

"When a girl has a boy in her room, she has to leave the door open."

"Why?"

"To keep them from *making out*." Richie demonstrated by rubbing two cars together.

"Gross," said Eddie, laughing. "Can we just race already?"

Eddie's red Corvette ended up winning two out of three rounds. He wasn't surprised. The Corvette was his favorite for a reason, mostly because it was the first car his dad ever gave him before he got sick. It was times like these when he missed his dad the most.

He didn't think he was so delicate when his dad was still alive. There weren't endless medicines and doctor visits back then. Instead, his dad would take Eddie to the drug store or the bank or the barber—just the two of them—and let Eddie sit in his lap while he drove their old Plymouth. He even let Eddie put his hands on the steering wheel. Every time they went on these drives, Eddie somehow *knew* which streets they needed to take.

Which way's the barber shop? his dad would ask.

And Eddie would point and cry, *That way!*—always in the right direction.

According to his dad, he had a compass inside of him. For a long time, Eddie didn't know what a compass was. After his dad got sick and his mom started dragging Eddie to the doctor more often, Eddie used to wonder if the compass would show up in an x-ray.

He knew better now, but he also knew his sense of direction wasn't a fluke. When Richie had to leave, he got on his bike and pedaled off, while Eddie watched him from the window.

Eddie followed his progress as long as he could, until Richie was nothing but a speck in the distance. Long after Eddie stopped following Richie with his eyes, he continued to follow him with his mind. Street names and landmarks flashed through Eddie's head, his thoughts tracing the pattern of an imaginary map, until they came to rest on Jackson Street—the final stretch until Richie turned onto Witcham to get to Bill's house.

And right on the corner of Jackson Street, there was a house with a tree in the front yard.

He still thought of that tree sometimes. How the bark scratched

against his hands and the branches formed the perfect seat. How the leaves never triggered his allergies, despite his mother teaching him to believe they would.

It was *his* tree. It had brought him his friends.

And even if Eddie never dared to climb again (*You'll break your neck, Eddie, you'll break your neck break your neck break your neck—*), he would never forget the feeling that just for one moment, he had stepped outside his comfort zone and found freedom on the other side.

Author's Note:

If Stephen King ever wrote a long-overdue prequel about the Losers as little kids, I would read the shit out of it.

Also, this story was supposed to feature a lot more Stan and Bill, but then Richie had to show up and hijack the whole thing.